

Sense Of Meanings: A Deconstructive Lens On Time, Space And Opposites In The Film *The Host* (2016) Directed By Miranda Pennell

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Abstract

Deconstruction has been used in theater practice and performance art since the 1960s -1970s as a strategy to guide viewers to observation of things and people in and around the performance practice, questioning meaning and its making. This paper proposes that deconstruction is relevant and of value to screendance practitioners for the way in which it supports the challenging of dominant narratives, and invites us to notice and question fixed truths, including our own.

For the purpose of my argument I will focus on a film, *The Host* (2016) by Miranda Pennell, a film made from archive images, which are deconstructed by the filmmaker as part of her narrative making. Among the numerous studies and contributions Derrida has made within philosophical debate, I will focus solely on his theory of deconstruction of text and meaning to contextualize the deconstructive approach adopted by Miranda Pennell in her film *The Host* (2016). Pennell's approach includes her research into the narrative of the film. This inclusion gives the film a performative attribute, which I argue to be a point for considering the film a work of screendance.

The combination of the archive material and Pennell's approach to it, allows her to shift between various possible truths that cohabit within a broad spectrum of time and space. In the words of Trinh T. Minh-ha in "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning" from *Theorizing Documentary* edited by Michael Renov:

To compose is not always synonymous with ordering to persuade, and to give the filmed document another sense, another meaning, it is not necessarily to distort it. If life's paradoxes and complexities are not to be suppressed, the question of degrees and nuances is incessantly crucial.¹

Pennell's deconstructive approach favors the consideration of such "degrees and nuances"² when presenting her narrative, constructing meaning that is complex in its subtleties and implications by pairing opposite concepts and looking at their relation and their relation to herself and others. In *The Host* (2016) this pairing is consistent throughout the film, openly inviting viewers to question what is being shown.

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Through a close analysis of *The Host*, contextualized both with reference to Derrida and to the wider field of screendance, I conclude that a deconstructive approach offers filmmakers and screendance practitioners interested in re-interpreting archive materials through film editing the opportunity to expand choreography to another discipline. As a screendance practitioner, I find that this opens up a world of narrative possibilities, and this is reason enough to shine more light on works that do so.

Keywords: deconstruction, observation, archive, screendance, absence, presence, temporal and spatial shifts

Introduction

Miranda Pennell is one of the few filmmakers who engages with deconstruction to construct meaning that allows viewers to recognize the relativity of her process. As a dancer/performer I realized that what I cared mostly about when working was the time spent in the studio creatively figuring out possibilities with a choreographer. I valued the making part of the process more than performing. When I watched *The Host* I was stirred by how Pennell's narration included her thinking and her actions with relation to archive material. Other than having enjoyed its questioning of the colonial relationship between the UK and Iran, I was also attracted by how creative the filmmaker became with her archive material. I enjoyed watching what seemed like a choreographic process with images. This reignited my passion for composition and made me joyful to see that this was possible outside of a dance studio.

The Host has been presented at public screenings as a film documentary - and it certainly does document a process of research undertaken by the filmmaker with relation to images from a past time. However, there is also an element of performance in the film characterized by voice and clues about the filmmaker that is as important as the archive material used. Claudia Kappenberg points out, in *The Politics of Discourse in Hybrid Art Forms*, that if we are to consider the body as an indispensable 'partner' of film, to define screendance we should also consider this partner outside of the screen space, and possibly extend it to multiple concepts of its presence.³ In line with this expanded idea of the body being outside of the screen, I consider *The Host* to be a screendance work.

In an interview, Pennell recognizes her position in the film as a performative one. She explains that the use of her voice in narrating her research is an element that constitutes this role:

“I tried to give an indication of my presence and of course my voice, by narrating my experience and by narrating the process of making, I am doing a kind of performance...” (M. Pennell, personal communication, 31 November, 2019)

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Pennell deliberately chose to use her research process in the narrative and present herself as an investigator in the film. This character however is not visible in its entirety, but hints of her presence can be identified in the film. Parts of her body such as her hands, and objects like headphones, gloves, and her lunch sandwich container are deliberately shown.

... I had a desire to put myself in between these images, to show myself even though I can't be present in a film that is made up of these still photographs, but what I did do, because I had a desire to be present, I started scanning and photographing images around me and including them to show a trace of me... (M. Pennell, personal communication, 31 November, 2019)

The Host is primarily a film about the activities of the company British Petroleum (BP) in Iran, seen through the filmmaker's research of archive material and personal photos. The images concern the oil company where Pennell's father worked during the 1960s. "*The Host* is a film, which is about looking at images in the past and trying to make sense of them and trying to make sense of history." (M. Pennell, personal communication, 31 November, 2019)

The identification of personal elements (family photographs and images of the filmmakers' objects and hands) and impersonal elements (the photographs from the oil company stored in Coventry, UK) are important to understanding Pennell's consideration of present and past as well as her role in the narrative of the film. These elements opened a route to concepts of time and place that became significant to Pennell's creative process enabling her to shift between time periods and locations: "...I think what was most important is the shifting of time and shifting of place, so for me it was always important to come back to the present and come back to my position as the maker..." (M. Pennell, personal communication, 31 November, 2019) Time and place are interconnected with an idea of self. Pennell defines this 'self' as:

...a processor and transmitter of impressions...embodied observer... who does not resist her entanglement in the objects she studies, her research allows for the possibility that these objects may make claims on *her*, and eventually by extension, on *us*, in multiple ways.⁴

The interdependence between the self and the objects described by Pennell is similar in concept to Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction of meaning in literary analysis. He argued that there are no self-sufficient units of meaning in a text just as Pennell thinks that "claims on *her*"⁵ can rise from sources outside of her. In both cases there is a reciprocal relation, without which meanings would be deprived of wider associations and contexts.

Derrida And Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida developed deconstruction as an approach to philosophical and literary analysis in the 1960s. He challenged binary and hierarchical ideas of Western philosophy by showing that opposite terms and contradictory meanings are not autonomous, and that by deconstructing oppositions it becomes possible to explore the implications of their relationships.

“...to put it in a nutshell, deconstruction is the reading of texts in terms of their marks, traces, or undecidable features, in terms of their margins, limits or frameworks, and in terms of their self-circumscriptions or self-delimitations as texts.”⁶ So, instead of looking at what is in a text, the focus would be on what that text may exclude and other non-immediately recognizable connections to it. This concept has been extended to other disciplines, and for the purposes of this essay I will focus on its extension to theater, and performance art.

Focus on deconstructive theater or performance art already includes a variety of ways and possibilities resulting in a challenge to defining the approach. The latter is characterized by a questioning of conventional elements within the act of the theater making and/or performance process. I will offer examples from two artists who use deconstruction in their practice.

Rose English's *Flagrant Wisdom* (2009) is a site-specific performance in which English deconstructs an act of acrobatic glass balancing by juxtaposing it with a glass manufacturing process in the same performance. The material of glass is being shown from its conception. This strategy provides a comparison and invites viewers to reflect on multiple aspects of the glass, rather than single out the virtuosic acrobatic act, which is more readily associated with performance. Could glassmaking also be perceived as an act of performance? Rose English may indirectly be inviting her audience to ask that question. Another example is Augusto Corrieri's *In Place Of A Show*, a lecture performance that challenges the idea of what happens in a theater. Corrieri has toured theaters in Europe and South America to offer a viewpoint of when these are not being used as locations where performances are given. In a way, he is deconstructing the space to create a different type of performance, one that challenges the more known form of play or dramatic performance that would be programmed in the theaters in question. Pennell in *The Host* (2016) deconstructs her relationship to the images as well as the archive images themselves questioning and raising awareness to what is not readily visible or perceptible to her and viewers. My analysis of her approach has led me to identify absence and presence in the audio-visual image inside and outside of the screen, and spatial and temporal deconstruction.

Absence, Presence, Past, Present, Wide And Close Up In The Film *The Host*

Pennell deconstructs some of the images to reveal what may not be apparent at

first glance.

...the film asks us to look, and look again, at images produced by the Oil Company and personal photos taken by its British staff in Iran – including the filmmaker’s parents – not for what they show, but for what they betray.⁷

A series of photographic images of land (tectonic plates of Iran) are intercut and overlaid with drawings of maps, directional arrows, identification numbers and locations. Sounds of debris or rocks rolling and rain falling accompany these aerial photos, intercut and cross-faded with maps and close-up images. A few minutes after they first appear, some of these images are seen again. This time the filmmaker’s voice says: “the company would use aerial photography to pinpoint the location of the oil. Geologists studied the photos according to principles of geophysics to identify hidden patterns.”⁸

The hidden patterns or the idea of these are made more perceptible to the viewer through subtle superimpositions of maps and photographs created by cross dissolves of the images. The hidden patterns become visible thanks to the emphasis of images that contain absence. The signs are recognizable or readable only when juxtaposed or shown to coincide with the photographic images that alone indicate concealment of specificity.

The Host includes various photographs of the oil refinery and the oil fields found by Pennell in the BP archives. As the images are presented and described as ‘painting’ or ‘real’, the voiceover also says: “There are thousands of workers here. Where is everybody?”⁹ In these photographs absence is telling. The voiceover continues: “They don’t show the inside of buildings, and the workers outside only appear by accident. You have to search for them.”¹⁰

This attention to what is not present, and to the opposition of outside and inside, defers the perception of what we see. So instead of seeing photographs of a place void of human existence, as the images appear to be, we perceive the possibility and probability of people inside as a result of Pennell’s presentation of absence. We can imagine a non-lifeless existence beyond the lifeless looking buildings; we can imagine people working inside. Relevance is given to what is invisible on screen but imaginable and inevitable when interpreting the image. Pennell’s acknowledgement of workers in the refinery by asking ‘who are these people?’ opens ways for more questions, such as why are the workers hardly ever visible? In response to Laura Mulvey’s chapter “The Pensive Spectator” in volume 2 of *The International Journal of Screendance* entitled *Scaffolding the Medium*, Pennell reflects on time and how “Mulvey’s essay thinks about time across different kinds of films...”¹¹ Pennell refers to two of her films *You Made Me Love You* and *Why*

Colonel Bunny Was Killed within the context of the time register attributing the former to the idea of now - movement within a continuous present shot; and the other to the idea of then - a reconstruction of re-framed archive still images. Miranda Pennell writes in 'Some thoughts on "Nowness" and "Thenness" that the former is the essence of performance and the latter the essence of photography.¹² In *The Host*, however, nowness and thenness are mutually included, a combination that fits with Derridean deconstruction of the marginality of time. A photograph of the oil fields taken in 1932 shows a site Miranda Pennell says she knows because 14 years later her parents would go there and 31 years later she too would be there, "peering over the edge of a white cot."¹³ Pennell continues: "I think I remember this, but in 20 minutes it will dawn on me that it must have been just a colored photograph that I've seen."¹⁴ Pennell informs the viewer what she will reflect about remembering. In another section of the film Pennell mentions the idea of non-chronological time, time that moves "in different directions, that it coexists with past and future."¹⁵ Time seems to be deconstructed by a playful interaction of images of the past and her voiceover as heard and experienced in the present moment of a viewer.

Pennell's voiceover again in *The Host*, in conjunction with a photograph of her mother looking at an historical site, continues to specify that her "...father can't be seen because he is on the outside looking at the figures on the inside. I am invisible too, looking over my father's shoulders at my mother who is looking at some other characters. She is wondering who these people were and who it was that put them there. She is imagining another time, and I am trying to imagine the time she was in."¹⁶ Past/present, inside/outside, visible/invisible all seem absent and present simultaneously to the viewer as a result of the 'nowness' of performance (the voiceover of the filmmaker and the viewer's reception of it) and the 'thenness' of the image of Pennell's mother in front of an ancient ruin.

In addition to the time register, Pennell also invites the viewer to deconstruct the spatial form of the image. One of the most arresting moments shown in *The Host* is of a worker in torn clothes, with greasy shoes and hands, seen with his back to the camera curved in a position that suggests physical strain in his job; he is flanked by a man standing in non-work attire, hand in pocket, wearing a fedora-type gentleman's hat, apparently watching and supervising the work. Pennell deconstructs this image by providing successive different close-ups of it. The act of moving closer into fragments of the image and offering different perspectives makes it possible to recognize multiple relations among the different fragments. The men's clothes, shoes, hands and stance are juxtaposed and their unnoticeable differences in the wide frame suddenly become apparent. Contrasting details such as their appearance, their positions and their occupations become interpretable. This offers the viewer an insight into the filmmaker's perception about the status of these two men.

Pennell's deconstructing of oppositional ideas and concepts in *The Host* emphasizes the subjectivity of her knowledge and that of the other individuals she observes. This process ultimately emphasizes the complexity of knowledge:

...I started with putting the images together, but the only way they take on a meaning is the one that I give them. So I want to involve the audience in that, because sometimes I make wrong assumptions about an image and I want that to be transparent and I want the viewer to go through a similar experience of questioning what we know about images, what we know about the past, questioning the stereotypes that we have about an image, so I think by sharing with the viewer some of the thoughts that I have about the images I am inviting them to question my authority as a storyteller and to ask themselves questions about the images. (M. Pennell, personal communication, 31 November, 2019)

Conclusion

A deconstructive lens on Miranda Pennell's work is useful to explore the creation and interpretation of meaning within screendance that makes use of archive materials. Observational and critical theory drawing on oppositions makes it possible to acknowledge and consider multiple subjective experiences and knowledge. This is relevant in that it can challenge dominant conceptions of history and societies, and therefore help transcend traditional historical narratives based on binary and hierarchical forms of thinking. Not that many makers of screendance use deconstructive approaches and include these within their narratives. Why? Possibly dance is still predominantly conceived and perceived within a theatrical form. More work that challenges this single connection is needed. As a person with a background in dance performance I find myself wanting to experience dance on screen differently than on screen performance. *The Host* (2016) connected me to the perspective of choreographing archive and the performative element being present and absent in the film. As an artist I am inspired to make work that re-organizes and re-interprets archives. Writing about deconstruction in *The Host* (2016) has also uncovered some of my own fixed truths and challenged my critical approach to meaning in film and screendance.

Biography

Luisa is an Anglo-Italian artist and a movement professional with a keen interest in film. Following a career in performance she began experimenting with film in 2009 and pursued this interest, obtaining an MA screendance from London Contemporary Dance School in London in 2020. During the MA she became particularly interested in editing archive material, curated a historical screening as part of the student-led screendance festival Frame Rush 2019, and edited a series of archive-based films to mark The Place's 50th year anniversary. Luisa

collaborates as a film maker with dancers and choreographers, filming and editing a series of short films that have been exhibited internationally in festivals and galleries. Recently Luisa was invited to guest co-edit (together with Marisa Hayes) the section “Choreographing the Archive - Interfaces between Screendance and Archival Film Practices” for The International Journal of Screendance. Luisa is currently completing a Netflix-led training course (via Safe Sets) for the position of Intimacy Coordinator for Italian TV and film, and is relocating to Italy to start working on a series. She will also be continuing her independent research in Screendance.

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1 Minh-ha, 99-100.

2 Ibid., 100.

3 Kappenberg, 27.

4 Connolly, Gibson, Smith, online.

5 Ibid.

6 Silverman, 4.

7 Pennell, online.

8 Pennell.

9 Pennell.

10 Pennell.

11 Pennell, 72.

12 Ibid.

13 Pennell.

14 Pennell.

15 Pennell.
16 Pennell.